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Rep. Hughes

MUSKEGON NEWS

House Bill 5407

Jeffrey Willis walks out of sentencing, refuses to hear victim's family

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By **Lynn Moore**, lmoore8@mlive.com

MUSKEGON, MI - In an "unprecedented" move, Jeffrey Willis infuriated his murder victim's family by refusing to hear their statements and leaving the courtroom prior to his sentencing Monday.

Willis blew a kiss and responded to outraged members of the court gallery as he was escorted out of the Muskegon County courtroom Dec. 18 where he had been brought to face sentence for murdering Rebekah Bletsch in 2014.

Bletsch's sisters and mother gave tearful victim impact statements, which they had wanted Willis to hear. Jessica Josephson called Willis a "monster" and told him to "rot in hell."

But Willis wasn't there to hear her.

Willis will be transported to state prison to begin serving his mandatory life sentence without parole. He was convicted in November of first-degree murder for shooting Bletsch as she jogged alongside a rural Muskegon County road.

Muskegon County Circuit Judge William Marietti ruled that Willis must go to state prison rather than stay in the Muskegon County Jail. Willis' defense attorney, Fred Johnson, said it would be difficult for the defense to prepare for Willis' next trial for the kidnapping and murder of Jessica Heeringa if he's in prison.

Marietti said it would be a "security risk" to keep Willis at the county jail, and also didn't believe he had jurisdiction to determine where Willis would serve his murder sentence.

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At the start of the court proceedings, Johnson told Marietti that it was Willis' "desire" to not be present for his sentencing. Muskegon County Prosecutor D.J. Hilson objected, saying Willis was taking the "cowardly" way out.

But Marietti said it was Willis' right to not be present, and so Willis left to shouts of "coward" from the packed courtroom.

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